

# The Briefing



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## Calling the shots: Science and ethics collide

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Scientific breakthroughs are big news these days. Scientists discover the gene for this or that disease; new drugs let you lose weight or feel happier or pay attention; there are techniques to make babies for infertile couples or grandmothers; and soon we'll be able to give grieving parents an exact copy of the child who died. What is more, we all have the absolute right to all of it.

What we are seeing is the outworking of a humanity which is superbly fulfilling one part of its God-given charge to rule the world, and utterly failing in another. We are proving that God has given us the gifts to understand and manipulate the created world to an absolutely incredible degree. What we can achieve through scientific research is truly amazing.

It is also amazing that we abuse it so badly.

Science has created its problems before—the atom bomb, pollution, global warming and so on. We are familiar with the issues involved with ‘if we can do it, does that mean we should do it?’. Yet until the recent leaps forward in genetic technology, the questions were rather distant. It was terrible that people were killed by the atom bomb, but most of us were not affected. Global warming is a nebulous sort of issue. However, what we do with our own bodies, our lives and our children is very close to everyone. Suddenly we are not concerned with what is wise or foolish for the world in general, but with human rights, human nature, my personal rights in my own family.

## Just make it legal

One common response in the face of ethical problems is to reduce the issue to a purely legal one. When the Food and Drug Administration in the USA approved the use of the drug RU-486 Mifeprex (the ‘morning-after’ pill, which aborts a fertilised ovum), the reasons given were quite straightforward. Careful evaluation of the scientific evidence showed that the drug is safe and effective, and this evaluation adhered strictly to the FDA’s legal responsibilities as a science-based public health regulatory agency.

Regulating healthcare means, evidently, merely deciding that the drug has its stated effect, presumably with no unwanted side-effects. That’s all we need to know. That’s all the law demands. With this knowledge, we can make it legal, and there is nothing further to decide. The trouble is, it also kills developing babies.

Sticking to the letter of the law makes things neat, but what about the bigger issues? In this case, all the law does is ask a technical, scientific question. It is a great failing of our society that we assume that those who understand the technology also understand its risks and problems. Yet this is simply not true. For example, I don’t know what is involved in testing an unborn baby to see if it has Down’s Syndrome. However, I do know that what is important in such a test is the attitude of the parents in deciding whether to have the test. If it is because they will abort the child if it has Down’s, then that is immoral. If it is because they want to be able to prepare the best circumstances possible for a child with Down’s, then it is moral. The technology or even the availability of the test is not the problem. The attitude of the parents is what matters. In the case of the morning-after pill, whether it works reliably is not the issue. Whether it should be used at all, is.

The attitude of individuals is precisely the problem. The more options there are for abortion, the more parents are prepared to abort, the more the system will be designed to screen out ‘damaged’ babies. Dr Robert Edwards, whose work led to the first test-tube baby, has stated that in the future it would be irresponsible, even a sin, for parent to have a baby with a genetic disease. The moral thing to do would be to kill the baby.

Think of the world this will create. It will certainly not be one of reproductive choice for parents, despite the publicity to this effect. Even if there is legally available choice to have your unhealthy child, think of the political battles over funding for any healthcare. This will be a society where the rights of the healthy outweigh the rights of the sick.

## It’s my right

I don’t think...that divorce is a social disaster, but I do think it’s a tragedy—and I mean that in a precise, quasi-Greek sense. It represents the collision of two absolute and irreconcilable moral imperatives—the autonomy of adults and the security of children. (From discussion in *Slate* magazine.)

It is peculiar to our times that the autonomy of adults is considered an absolute moral imperative. Whatever else happens, we must maintain our right to do what we want. This simple proposition, sounding so noble when in the context of, say, slavery, lies at the heart of the mess that human rights-based ethics has created. The fact is, if we are to defend personal autonomy as a moral imperative, then we will no longer have a moral society.

Just how many rights can one person have? A recent debate in Australia over whether single women and lesbians could be excluded from IVF was full of claims about rights. Any woman, it was claimed, has the right to have a child. If she is discriminated against on the grounds of her marital status or sexual preference, then that is unfair. The same language can be heard in debates over human cloning and the possibility of future breakthroughs in reproductive technology—that these things are good because people have the right to have children.

This right to have children is so fundamental that we are allowed to discard lives in order to fulfil this dream—that being the fate of unneeded embryos created in most IVF programmes. In order to increase the chances of a viable pregnancy, extra embryos are created in case some do not ‘take’. The rest? They’re just thrown away. Forget the designer baby—we already have the disposable baby.

Having let that happen, it is not at all surprising that the next step has been taken—to allow experiments on embryonic tissue. That’s our right too—the right of sick adult people with illnesses that might be treatable with stem-cell technology. Those sick people have the right to treatment, even at the cost of someone else’s life. Well, why not? If we can throw babies away, why not do a few experiments first?

The concept of human rights can lead to all sorts of tricky situations. ‘They didn’t have the right to do that to me’, proclaims a man on one of Australia’s ubiquitous current affairs shows, speaking of his circumcision as a newborn baby. Yet a few days before his circumcision operation, in some parts of the United States, his mother would have had the right to kill him. Only a few months earlier in an Australian hospital she could demand the same. It would make an interesting rejoinder in the baby-circumcision debate. Circumcised? You’re lucky to be alive.

In the quest for their right to autonomy, parents—particularly mothers—have the right to do just about anything. Of course, they can’t kill them with impunity once children are out of the womb, but they can walk out on them, deny them access to their father, or deny them a father at all. It’s a woman’s right, after all, to decide how she lives her own life.

Unless, of course, the mother wants the right to let her baby live. I am thinking here of the case in Britain a few months ago, where co-joined twins were born. The mother had come to Britain for the birth so that the twins would have the best care. The British court, however, ruled that one of her twins had to be killed. Yes, it was so that the stronger, healthier twin could have a greater chance of survival—but the mother who, in this terrible situation, decided she did not want to take the positive step of killing one of her children, was overruled. The parent’s rights did not count in this case. This seems particularly ironic when it was not a clear-cut issue at all. Judges had to agonise over what was correct—why not leave that decision to the parents? More than anything else, this case pointed out how unclear the notion of ‘rights’ is—it’s a slogan, not an ethical framework.

How did we get into this mess? Part of the problem was ever allowing discussion of human rights to proceed without discussion of human responsibilities. If a parent ever has a right to a child, then that parent also has a responsibility to care for that child. But we don't like talk of responsibility—it sounds, well, restrictive. Confining. Hard work. It's much better to maintain the fiction of our right to personal autonomy. It is a fiction, because while we defend our rights to autonomy we depend on others for just about everything—for company, for joy, for work, for food, for clothing, for a point to living.

Public ethical discussions have become almost totally self-centred. They may be expressed in the third person—'the right of a mother'—but the ultimate value is: if I want it, I should be able to have it. Genesis 3 describes a similar approach to ethics. We haven't learned many lessons since then. Nor have we learned from another Genesis incident about challenging God.

## The Tower of Genome

The Human Genome Project is the effort to find out what a normal human genetic code is. Just as we have standard diagrams and models of what a normal, healthy skeleton is or a normal, healthy bowel or lung. Of course it does not reflect any real person's genome, any more than the model skeleton represents any one person's skeleton. Everyone has differences, and those making the standard model have to decide at each point of difference what is normal and what is a distortion.

It is a difficult technical problem. What we need, then, are well-trained technicians to make these decisions. Such a response, however, demonstrates the lack of recognition of the difference between a technical issue and an ethical one. What if, for instance, there is an identifiable gene that controls sexual inclination? What will be decreed as normal, and what an aberration? Will it be decided that there are two or three 'standard' settings, for heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual, but anything else—say, paedophile or rapist—is abnormal? That is not a scientific decision. It is a moral one. But it is the technicians who are being put in a position to make it.

Discovering technologies that enable us to manipulate our very genes might be a scientific wonder, or a scientific horror—but it's not the science that makes the difference. It's the ethics. On its own, the technology is morally neutral.

The Human Genome Project has gone forward with a great deal of comment but very little serious ethical consideration. The funding was in the billions, with about one percent diverted for ethical considerations. That is still a huge amount of money, not often given to ethics or any kind of philosophy. Yes, one percent of its budget was given to ethics, but there was never any chance that if the ethical committees decided it was ethically wrong that the project would stop. Some leading scientists have even objected to giving that much money to ethics. Steve Jones, a leading British geneticist, has said there should never be ethical limits on scientific investigation; whatever we can find out, we should. Ethical limits only apply to applications of the science, which is up to 'society' to decide. In other words,

scientists are not part of 'society'; they should be privileged to do whatever they want, regardless of any potential consequences, for which they are not to be held responsible.

I used to think this was a reasonable position. You must not stem the flow of knowledge. The scientist who discovers something cannot be held accountable for its use. But I now think there is a certain naivety in that approach. Scientists are part of society; they use our money through taxes for what they do, or else they use money from industry backers who are also part of society. As a whole population of humans, we are allowing one portion of our population—the ones with technical expertise but no necessary training in ethics or how to weigh up risks against advantages—to go ahead and decide what should be studied. Why? The implications of what we know affect us all. Why do we leave it in the hands of people who openly declare they will brook no ethical restraints? Again, we can see, the ethical implications of technology are actually independent of the technology. We as a society are not choosing wisely where to put resources; in fact, we're not choosing at all.

The Human Genome Project, like any technology, is not bad in itself. It's an example of the tremendous power God has given us to rule over our world. It's a wonderful example of human cooperation and the ability to achieve a massive goal. And yes, a lot of the claims about it can be taken as true. It may well be the first step towards curing currently incurable diseases. It may contribute to humans living longer, healthier lives. These are good things.

It may be, however, that the risks of its harmful use outweigh the potential benefits. For, given that people are sinful and selfish and generally short-sighted about the future, this knowledge could bring a lot of harm. It could bring terrible prejudice against the less-than-genetically-healthy; it could easily bring eugenics back.

These are real issues, and need to be evaluated seriously in the light of a realistic understanding of human nature. As long as we keep treating them as secondary issues, or not issues at all, we create technology at our own risk.

What is the way forward for a society that has the technology but is ethically ungrounded and ignores God's revelation? I don't think the answer is to try to stop the science, and that's not just because I think it would be impossible. If it's not this technology it will be something else, and our ability to develop new technologies is part of who we are as humans. We must not let our society forget, however, that it is God who gave us these abilities, and it is God who will hold us accountable for how we use them. Even more importantly, we can remind our community that this same God has given us clear guidelines for how to use our abilities in a way that respects him and loves others. We have to keep living and preaching God's values, which are the only ones which will make life worth living.

Most of all, we must do what we can to help humans see that they are not God. For, as humanity will eventually discover one way or another, the attempt to overthrow God, whether it's by building a tower or mending our own genes, will never work. The problem stated may be in terms of new technologies now, but it's the same problem humanity has always had. We can be very powerful without God—but without God, it will all fall apart in the end.

